

THE FRENCH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The **French educational system** is highly centralized, organized, and ramified. It is divided into three different stages:

- **Primary education** (*enseignement primaire*);
- **Secondary education** (*enseignement secondaire*);
- **Higher education** (*enseignement supérieur*).

Primary and secondary education are predominantly public (private schools also exist).

All educational programmes in France are regulated by the Ministry of National Education (officially called *Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche*).

The head of the ministry is the Minister of National Education one of the highest-ranking officials in the cabinet.

The teachers in public primary and secondary schools are all state civil servants civil, making the *ministère* the largest employer in the country. Professors and researchers in France's universities are also employed by the state.

At the primary and secondary levels, the curriculum is the same for all French students in any given grade, which includes public, semi-public and subsidised institutions. However, there exist specialised sections and a variety of options that students can choose. The reference for all French educators is the *Bulletin officiel de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche (B.O.)* which lists all current programmes and teaching directives. It is amended many times every year.

School education is compulsory for children aged between six and sixteen; this obligation covers both elementary education (elementary school) and the first four years (*collège*) of secondary education.

Children are enrolled in kindergarten by their parents, whereas they are automatically enrolled in elementary school.

Parents may choose the educational institutions they wish their children to attend when those reach the age to go to the *lycée*.

Elementary school is compulsory for all children who have reached the age of six. Generally, parents are expected to enrol their children in the school near their place of residence. Public education is free.

PRIMARY EDUCATION

Schooling in France is mandatory as of age 6, the first year of primary school. Many parents start sending their children earlier though, around age 3 as nursery classes (*maternelle*) are usually affiliated to a borough's primary school. Some even start earlier at age 2 in *pré-maternelle* classes, which are essentially day-nurseries or day-care centres. The last year of *maternelle*, *grande section* is an important step in the educational process as it is the year in which pupils are introduced to reading.

After nursery, the young pupils move on to primary school. It is in the first year (*cours préparatoire*) that they will learn to write and develop their reading skills. Much akin to other educational systems, French primary school students usually have a single teacher (or perhaps two) who teaches the complete curriculum, such as French, mathematics, science, humanities to name a few. The French word for a schoolteacher at the primary school level is *professeur des écoles* (previously called *instituteur*, or its feminine form *institutrice*).

Public education is free.

Maternelle (Kindergarten)		
Age	Grade	Abbreviation
3 -> 4	Petite section	PS
4 -> 5	Moyenne section	MS
5 -> 6	Grande section	GS

École élémentaire (Primary school)		
Age	Grade	Abbreviation
6 -> 7	Cours préparatoire	CP / 11ème
7 -> 8	Cours élémentaire première année	CE1 / 10ème
8 -> 9	Cours élémentaire deuxième année	CE2 / 9ème
9 -> 10	Cours moyen première année	CM1 / 8ème
10 -> 11	Cours moyen deuxième année	CM2 / 7ème

Religious instruction is not supplied by public schools. Laïcité (secularism) is one of the main precepts of the French Republic. Pupils therefore have civics courses to teach them about *la République*, its function, its organisation, and its famous motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity).

SECONDARY EDUCATION

Secondary education for pupils aged 16 and over is offered in *lycées d'enseignement général et technologique* (secondary schools) and in *lycées professionnels* (secondary schools for vocational training).

French secondary education is divided into two schools:
the *collège* for the first four years directly following primary school;
the *lycée* for the next three years.

The completion of secondary studies leads to the *baccalauréat*.

Brevet des collèges

The *Brevet des collèges* is the first official diploma a pupil has to sit. It is not required in order to enter *lycée*. Until 2006 the school marks for the whole of the third (4ème) and final year (3ème) were taken into account for a percentage of the mark. The rest of the mark consisted of the final exam, the *brevet*. Pupils were only tested on French, Mathematics and History/Geography/Citizenship for the exam.

Starting in 2007, only the marks from the final year (3ème) were taken into consideration.

Baccalauréat

The *baccalauréat* (also known as *bac*) is the end-of-*lycée* diploma students sit for in order to enter university, a *classe préparatoire*, or professional life.

It is generally taken at 18 if the pupil has not repeated a class during secondary school. The term *baccalauréat* refers to the diploma and the examinations themselves. It is comparable to English A-Levels, American SATs or ACTs, New South Wales's Higher School Certificate and the German Abitur.

Many students sit for the theory-oriented *baccalauréat général* which is divided into three streams of study, called *séries*. The *série scientifique* (S) is concerned with the natural sciences, physical sciences and mathematics, the *série économique et sociale* (ES) with economics, social sciences and mathematics, and the *série littéraire* (L) focuses on French, foreign languages, philosophy and the arts. However, these *séries* are not exactly specialisations and every *bac*-possessor has the right to integrate any public university in the catchment area if this applies to the subject they wish to apply for. Students having followed the L series do not have enough scientific knowledge from their secondary education alone to succeed in science university courses, therefore some combinations of baccalauréats and university courses are very rare.

There is also the *baccalauréat technologique* and *baccalauréat professionnel*. The former mixes theoretical and vocational training and prepares students for professional higher studies, whereas the later focuses on vocational training and prepares students for a direct entry into the marketplace.

Collège (Junior High)

Age	Grade	Abbreviation
11 -> 12	Sixième	6 ^e
12 -> 13	Cinquième	5 ^e
13 -> 14	Quatrième	4 ^e
14 -> 15	Troisième	3 ^e

Lycée (High school)

Age	Grade	Abbreviation
15 -> 16	Seconde	2 ^{de}
16 -> 17	Première	1 ^e
17 -> 18	Terminale	Term or Tle

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education in France is divided between *grandes écoles* and universities. *Grandes écoles* are considered more prestigious than universities (tellingly, the term literally means "great schools", "elite schools"), and they are generally much more selective than other higher education institutions.

Universities are also very well recognized. They belong to the public system, and carry out a large part of French academic research.

A striking trait of French higher education, compared with other countries, is the small size and multiplicity of establishments, each specialized in a more or less broad spectrum of areas.

A middle-sized French city, such as Grenoble or Nancy, may have 2 or 3 universities (focused on science or sociological studies), and also a number of engineering and other specialized higher education establishments. In Paris and its suburbs there are 13 universities, none of which is specialized in one area or another, and a large number of smaller institutions which are highly specialised.

It is not uncommon for graduate teaching programmes (master's degrees, the course part of PhD programmes etc.) to be operated in common by several institutions, allowing the institutions to present a larger variety of courses.

In engineering schools, a large share of the teaching staff is often made up of non-permanent professors; instead, part-time professors are hired to teach one specific point only. These part-time professors are generally hired from neighbouring universities, research institutes, or industries.

Another original feature of the French higher education system is that a large share of the scientific research is not done by universities, but by research establishments such as CNRS or INSERM. In many cases, the research units of those establishments are installed inside universities (or other higher education establishments), and jointly operated by the research establishment and the university.

Higher education includes several systems:

The *Grandes écoles* of engineering and business administration. These are competitive-entrance higher education institutions offering either four or five-year courses directly after the *Baccalauréat* or three-year courses after two years of *classe préparatoire* (preparatory class) during which students prepare for the entrance examinations to the *Grandes écoles*.

Vocational training lasts two to three years after the *Baccalauréat*. Courses may be taken in the *Sections de techniciens supérieurs* - STS (Advanced technicians sections) where students prepare for the *Brevet de technicien supérieur* - BTS (Vocational Training Certificate For Advanced Technicians) and are also taught by the *Instituts universitaires de technologie* - IUT (Polytechnics).

Some training courses have special entrance requirements and their own organization (study of medicine, pharmacy, paramedical studies, study of art and architecture, etc.).

To begin higher studies in France, foreign students must have a French baccalaureate or foreign equivalent and be able to prove that their command of French is good enough for them to take the course of their choice.

Entrance procedures vary depending on the educational institution and the chosen training course. For the *Classes préparatoires* for entrance to the *Grandes écoles*, *IUTs* (Polytechnics) and *Instituts universitaires professionnalisés* - *IUP* (Professional University Institutes) students are to enrol directly with the institution concerned. For Premier cycle enrolment at a university, students are required to file an entrance application before the start of the academic year.

Foreign students are required to take a written examination and an oral to test their command of French.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Universities

France's 88 public universities are spread throughout the country, from the Sorbonne in Paris (founded in 1179) to the high-tech campus of Nice-Sophia-Antipolis, and cover the entire range of academic disciplines: from the sciences, including mathematics, chemistry, physics and biology to technology, covering computer science, engineering, materials science, and electrical engineering; through to literature, languages, the arts, the social sciences, law, economics, management, health, sports, and more.

Research activities are an integral part of the universities: 315 doctoral schools train 4,000 doctoral students in connection with more than 1,200 research laboratories (affiliated with both the universities and research organizations). French doctoral schools have always been very open to international students: One out of every 4 PhD theses is prepared by a student from abroad.

Programs in medicine, pharmacology, and dentistry are connected to the universities in partnership with hospital centres, and have their own organization and courses of study.

Grandes Écoles

The *Grandes Écoles* are uniquely French institutions. Created in the early 19th century in parallel to the university system, they are extremely selective and offer education of a very high standard. Most offer degrees in engineering and business, but others specialize in public administration (such as the world-renowned *École Nationale d'Administration*), defense, university teaching and scholarly research (the *Écoles Normales Supérieures*), agronomy, or veterinary studies.

Grandes Écoles offer a diploma at Master level (Bac+5) but also intermediate degrees such as Bachelor (3 years), Master of Science (4 or 5 years), *Mastère Spécialisé* (6 years)...

Grandes Écoles for Engineering

There are roughly 240 Engineering Schools, which share common characteristics; this guarantees the quality of the Engineering Master Degree (5 years), which is a national degree and covers all areas of engineering science.

Grandes Écoles for Business and Management

More than 200 Business Schools offer specializations and training programs adapted to the changing economic environment and new management practices. Instruction is often structured around internships and international exchanges.

Specialized institutions

Specialized institutions offer higher-level training in specific areas such as art, design, fashion, tourism, architecture, paramedic services, social services, and so on.

DEGREES

French higher education is adopting the common European architecture (LMD) that takes into account the number of years of validated study following the *baccalauréat* (French high school matriculation examination for university entrance).

Thus, *baccalauréat* + three years = *Licence* (180 ECTS), *baccalauréat* + five years = *Master* (300 ECTS), and *baccalauréat* + eight years = *Doctorat* (PhD).

Licence, Master and Doctorat are the key stages of higher education studies.

N.B :The *baccalauréat* is the first degree awarded in the higher education system; it gives students access to higher education institutions.

	National Degrees	Institution Degrees
8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctorat (PhD) 	
6 years		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mastère spécialisé - Ms (Specialized Master) • Master of Business Administration - MBA
5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master recherche - M2 (Master of Research) • Master professionnel - M2 (Professional Master) • Master of Science – MSc (accredited) • Diplôme d'ingénieur - Master degree in Engineering • Diplômes des Grandes Écoles d'ingénieur et de commerce - Master 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diplômes des Grandes Écoles d'ingénieur et de commerce - Master
4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master M1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master of Science - MSc (4 or 5 years)
3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Licence (Bachelor degree) Bachelor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor